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Book Reviews

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## Review of *The Pink Tide: Media Access and Political Power in Latin America* edited by Lee Artz (Rowman & Littlefield)

Paula Santa Rosa

**ABSTRACT** The 'Pink Tide' refers to the unprecedented succession of electoral victories of socialist-leaning populist presidents in the region, starting with Chávez's victory in 1998. This anthology explores media reforms in countries that most consistently reelected progressive candidates, specifically Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Brazil. Through these case studies, Artz seeks to show that the primary indicator of democracy and social justice is the extent to which governments give the population direct access and control of the means of communication. Despite the complexities of the different cases, Artz presses that public participatory media, by promoting and prefiguring a socialist society, is an integral part of the democratic struggle that must be actively and continuously pursued by social movements.

*The Pink Tide: Media Access and Political Power in Latin America*. Edited by Lee Artz. London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, 226 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-78660-239-8. US List: \$135.00.

Edited by Lee Artz, this volume brings together a collection of articles that critically analyze media democratization efforts in Latin America's Pink Tide governments. The "Pink Tide" refers to the unprecedented succession of electoral victories of socialist-leaning populist presidents in the region, starting with Chávez's victory in 1998 (1, 3). The book explores media reforms in countries that most consistently reelected progressive candidates, specifically Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Brazil. Through these case studies, Artz seeks to show that the primary indicator of democracy and social justice is the extent to which governments give the population direct access to and control of the means of communication (3).

In chapter 1, Artz defends the claim that the Pink Tide is the political expression and culmination of mass movements of a reconfigured working class against neoliberal reforms, with demands for basic subsistence (4, 6, 10, 19). Resisting the populist label, he argues that such characterization dismisses the decisive and active role of popular movements, and the robust participatory democracy programs and substantial social benefits brought by some of these governments (9). He differentiates between Pink Tide governments that have empowered popular movements and fostered participatory democratic control of public services, like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, and the ones that hindered social participation and diverted mass movements from political power, like Brazil, Argentina, and Chile (4, 7). Borrowing from Gramsci's notion of the Integral State, he argues that a socialist government may exist within a capitalist State, but if accompanied by a civil society dedicated to social justice, lead by a popular socialist movement, it could be capable of transforming the social order (30). He also defends the idea that public participatory media is a crucial means for sharing new ideas and values, while demonstrating a socialist alternative to commercial media and neoliberal

imperatives (39, 43). Yet surprisingly he seems to bypass discussions of mass media's influence and the effects of commercial media in the mediatization of politics, which is intrinsically connected with rise of populism. Another potential benefit of a public participatory media system might be the reduction of populist politics.

The first four contributions explore the media reforms in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Uruguay. Demonstrating an understanding of the *positive* freedom of expression and the recognition of information and airwaves as public goods, the reforms established specify that broadcast licenses would be divided in three equal parts: 33% for public media, 33% for private media, and 34% for community media (except Venezuela, which didn't specify the percentages for each). Prior to these reforms, these countries had been characterized by media ownership concentrated among a few families and conglomerates, connected with commercial interests and conservative political parties. Also, community radios were often repressed and persecuted for promoting radical politics that opposed the political and economic elites. These reforms guaranteed and expanded the rights of community media and included previously excluded voices with positive representations and self-representations. All cases involved different participatory processes and levels of citizen participation.

Yet each country had different levels of antagonism towards the established media elites, either refusing to renew and revoking licenses (Venezuela, Uruguay), posing sanctions for the promotion of discrimination (Bolivia), or more radically confiscating private media and prohibiting media ownership by non-media enterprises (Ecuador). The chapters highlight different challenges encountered, such as the oppositional political force of private media, polarization, the varying lack of funding for community media and participatory bodies, community media reliance on advertising and foreign NGOs, the corrupting power of media corporations, and the entrenchment of right-wing and media actors within state bureaucracies. Ultimately, private media remains dominant and, in varying degrees, community media remains local and marginal. Light's contribution proposes the Uruguayan water movement as a successful model, emphasizing social movements' ongoing mobilization and appeals beyond partisan, political, and ideological divides (124-126). Curiously, and in-line with Artz who, in the introduction, skirted discussions of mass media's influence, Light's account neglects the role of media in this struggle. It seems to me that the media coverage of the water movement would not be as biased and antagonistic as the coverage of media democratization, since it did not threaten (at least not as directly) the economic and political power of the national media elites, and thus would not lead to a polarized media and public sphere articulated around partisan politics. Regardless of conjecture, the capacity of this model to be replicated for media reforms seems questionable.

In chapter 6, Harlow and Davis explore what happens to alternative media when leftist governments gain power, looking at cases in El Salvador, Brazil, and Argentina. They argue that alternative media can still play a counterhegemonic and independent role, despite having interests aligned with the government. In polarized contexts, they warn that the challenge is to resist uncritically valorizing the government for fears of undermining it (147). However insightful, their assumption that alternative media is necessarily leftist seems myopic; extreme-right alternative media isn't an exclusively US phenomenon. It would be interesting to investigate, across the political spectrum, the alternative media that might have emerged with the Pink Tide.

In chapter 7, Schwartz provides a fierce Marxist critique of Brazil's digital revolution through the analysis of *Fora do Eixo*, a website for alternative cultural production. *Fora do Eixo* was ultimately an expression of the emerging middle-class that actually reinforced digital capitalism and consumer culture, and failed to build a democratic public-access

digital culture. Subsequently, Reilly discusses regional communicative sovereignty through the Pink Tide media initiatives for cultural exchange and networking, pointing to difficulties of regional integration.

As expected, the authors' views are not always aligned. For example, contrary to Artz, Kitzberger presents Correa's government as top-down and disconnected from mass movements (88, 89, 106). Additionally, Lupien brings a more liberal-pluralist approach and defends the inclusion of private actors in regulating bodies, while arguing against direct government funding for community media to prevent compromising autonomy (81). Artz directly addresses this by arguing that government financing does not imply a lack of democracy or independence, but provides the necessary support for the production of content independent from advertising sales and profit returns (39). He goes even further, arguing that, on its own, autonomous grassroots alternative media actually releases pressure from the dominant hegemony by transferring potential opposition to the private sphere, leaving power relations unchanged (193).

The concluding chapter reads almost like a manifesto as Artz eloquently defends the idea that there is no compromise between neoliberal capitalism and democratic socialism. He makes explicit the connection between social movements, media reforms, and broader social transformations in the Pink Tide, differentiating between 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialist governments like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, and those that facilitated neoliberalism and "that may rightly be called populists," like Brazil and Argentina (196-199). Despite the complexities of the different cases, Artz presses that public participatory media, by promoting and prefiguring a socialist society, is an integral part of the democratic struggle that must be actively and continuously pursued by social movements (194).

 [Bio](#)



#### **Paula Santa Rosa**

Paula Santa Rosa is a Brazilian PhD student in the Communication Department at the University of California, San Diego. Her research interests are left populism, social movements, political parties, and institutional and social change.



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